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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses how to use opera in secondary and college courses to illustrate and clarify historical developments. For example, opera can be used in social history courses to help students understand changing social attitudes toward the child in the 19th and 20th centuries. Students are first required to read a basic work on the history of the child to learn about public attitude change of this period, particularly as it affects education. The teacher can also use lecture and discussion to draw attention to the two differing theories of child education of this era. Students are then required to examine operas to see how and by whom the child is portrayed on the opera stage. They also examine operas recommended for children to see or hear. The opera of this period affords a demonstration of the change from little, if any, public concern for the child to a society in which the child plays a considerable role. Specific illustrations are provided in the paper. For example, just as there was a broadening interest in children's education in the middle years of the 19th century, so the role of the child on stage increased. First, the children's chorus appeared in operas such as Lortzing's "The Poacher." Meyerbeer's "Prophet" contains a cathedral choir-school chorus. Thereafter, children's choruses are frequently found. From the last decade of the 19th century into the middle of the 20th century the state became increasingly involved in all aspects of the child's life. It was at this time the composers began to write full scale operas such as "Hansel and Gretel" designed for children to see. (Author/RM)

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Using Opera in the Social Studies Classroom:

The Child in Opera

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Opera offers challenging possibilities for the historian's classroom use. It has been a significant cultural activity for nearly four hundred years, although its direct antecedents stretch back through madrigal plays, miracle plays and the Christian mass into Greek drama. Three historical illustrative uses have been effective for me: direct influence upon contemporary events; reflections of contemporary attitudes; and reflections of changes over a period of time.[1]

These uses of opera are helped by the teacher's and the class's knowing something about the opera audience, a possibility not so easily available in the more private arts. For example, it is more difficult to know if a purchased book has been read or sheet music played than it is to surmise that an attended opera has been observed. Opera gained wide European popularity in the mid-18th century and retained it into the early 20th century. For a time in the 20th century, its significance seemed confined to intellectual and urban classes; however, opera again is assuming a place of cultural, didactic, and intellectual significance.[2]

The teacher who uses opera for classroom illustration needs to recognize certain limits. A single instance -- the "first this" or an "isolated that" -- may be a misleading illustration unless the instance is part of a trend.[3] Of course, this is no different from using one novel, one picture, one diary, or one letter as the sole example of any influence, reflection, or change.[4] The fact that by and large this form is being used to illustrate and clarify historical developments for classroom use makes it more acceptable than it would be as a research device, where used alone it might make the work suspect.

Of the variety of uses, opera as political illustration has been quite

successful. Opera "in the service of the king" has its own characteristics from Lully to the present.[5] The role of 19th century composers in nationalistic struggles -- whether in Italy or Germany or the Slavic territories, for examples -- is significant. Opera critical of politics has drawn censorship as recently as Shostakovitch's Lady Macbeth of Minsk and as interestingly as Verdi's Masked Ball.

In addition, opera can be used to demonstrate ideas in development and in conflict. The changes in the western conceptions of religion or freedom, for example, have moved the librettists and composers of such diverse works as Fidelio and Ice Break. And the conflict of freedom and conscience with altar and crown is a major concern in Verdi's Don Carlos.

The third area, the understanding of changing social attitudes,[6] has been most difficult to develop because the operatic statements have rarely been direct, but depend more upon scrutiny of a large number of works for patterns, inference, and connections.[7] Nevertheless the students have responded favorably.

One good example of this use in illustrating social history is in the parallel courses between opera and life concerning the public perception of the child.[8] Focused on the 19th and 20th centuries, the opera helps show an era of great public and statutory change. While the precise dates of child-oriented reform movements and legislation varies from country to country, the basic change of attitude from the child as the ward of the parents to the child as the charge of the state is general. It is fascinating to observe the change reflected in and sometimes even advocated by literature, clothing, intellectual concepts of education and opera.[9]

We will focus on one childhood age level: the years after infancy and before puberty. Thus there will be none of the ageless student tenors, or

soprano maidens, nor any of the trouser roles that survive from the older castrati roles.[10] No Cherubinos ---, no Siebels ---, no Octavians ---, and not even Lulu's love-struck school-boy.[11]

Several directions for investigation are possible. One is to examine operas recommended for children to see or hear.[12] A second is to see how and by whom the child is portrayed on the opera stage. In preparing for this kind of assignment, the students would have read a basic work on the history of the child. From it they will have gained an outline of the public attitude change, particularly as it affects education.

Lecture and discussion can be designed to draw attention to the two differing theories of child education in the 18th century. One was a conservative view that argued that education must control the "original sin" within the child.[13] Even in its greatest modification, "the tabula rasa,"[14] stress was laid on the need for good habit formation (as defined by the governing world).[15] The conservative view would become the first widely accepted theory. The opposing theory, attributed to Rousseau, encouraged an interest in "the process of growing up."[16] For the period of time we are considering, many governmental statutes on education have defined the first, the conservative view. Yet throughout those same two centuries, a number of reformers argued for the second, the process theory.[17] On many issues, including the need for some education and for the elimination of corporal punishment in education, spokesmen on both sides agreed.[18]

Of course, the first stage of transformation from the conservative to the process theory was the recognition that the modern state had a role and a stake in child education. A recognition that became accepted in many quarters by the end of the Napoleonic period.[19] The second stage, which

was slow in forming, was that some state-sponsored education should be extended to all children. Initially that education was heavily vocational, designed to fit the child for its preordained place in society.[20] At the same time, governments also legislated against or regulated child labor, neglect, and abuse.

The process theory, which came to be called "child-centered," continued to have advocates. Friedrich Froebel, in 1837, established kindergartens that emphasized education through play. Lowell Mason urged the introduction of music into the primary school curriculum. Nearly three quarters of a century would pass before the Froebel notions on education would be seriously tried in music education alone,[21] and it would be the third decade of the 20th century before much of the "child-centered" concept was in general educational practice.[22] Even the Montessori reforms, which proposed supplanting Froebel's naturalness with specific materials in a prepared situation, continued much of the "child-centered" quality.[23] By mid 20th century many European countries had developed legislation or policies designed to "guarantee the necessary social and economic conditions in which young and old alike might find fulfilment in the society of their birth."[24] Other aspects of the European wide change in attitude towards the child can be traced out with similar results. Literature for children,[25] social legislation,[26] and labor legislation[27] all moved towards child-centeredness.

Now, opera affords a demonstration of this change from little, if any, public concern for the child to a society in which the child plays a considerable role. There are several stages in the change. The first is the pre-Revolutionary era. With a few notable exceptions and a trace of pages, putti, and cherubs, the child almost never appears on the opera

stage during this period. But in the second period, the first half of the 19th century, the child appears as a mute and as a figure around which some aspects of the plot turned. Cherubini's Medee[28] and Bellini's Norma[29] are two examples. Of course, the former owes more to Euripides than to any one else. In Norma however, the children, the results of Norma's laison with a Roman soldier, are about to be killed by their mother. When she hesitates her friend Adalgisa urges her to look on the children with love. In Verdi's Two Foscari, the silent children are used by their mother to plead for their father's liberty.[30] Silent children did not disappear from the opera stage after the first half of the nineteenth century, witness Puccini's Trouble, Britten's John, and Floyd's wheelchair bound girl.

However, just as there was a broadening interest in children's education in the middle years of the 19th century, so the role of the child on stage increased. There were two major developments in this third period that lasted up until the last decade of the century. First, the children's chorus appeared in operas such as Lortzing's The Poacher.[31] Meyerbeer's Prophet contains a cathedral choir-school chorus.[32] Thereafter children's religious choruses are frequently found. As well, there are other non religious children's choruses, such as the street urchin chorus in Bizet's Carmen.[33] In most of the operas these choruses take an incidental role.

The second major development of this period was the adult singing the child's part. A significant example is Feodor, son of Boris Godunov.[34] In the second act, the child, sung by a mezzo soprano, plays a clapping game before his father directs his attention to Russian geography, an interesting juxtaposition of childhood games, which Froebel labeled "mother play," with education.

The fourth period, which lasted from the last decade of the nineteenth

century into the middle of the twentieth century, was an era of increasing involvement of the state in all aspects of the child's life.[35] It is during this period that educational goals and music, particularly opera, begin to come together. Froebel's "mother play" was slowly being accepted in the European system. With it there was a growing awareness of the child's world in opera; professional operas, written for public house performance, were written with the child as one of the centers of audience concern. Humperdinck's **Hansel and Gretel**[36] was begun as a child's Christmas entertainment to be performed by children. But it was soon transformed into an opera rich in harmony and symbolism. Adelheid Humperdinck, the composer's sister, had based the libretto on Grimm's tale. She made some startling changes. No longer was the mother wicked--just poor and tired. More importantly, at the finale not only were Hansel and Gretel saved, but they freed other boys and girls who had been ensnared by the witch. The roles of Hansel and Gretel were taken by adults but a children's chorus composes the gingerbread fence. Numbers of other composers would write full-scale operas designed for children to see, but with children's roles taken by adults. For example, Jules Massenet composed **Cendrillion**,[37] Hans Pfitzner -- **Der Arme Heinrich**,[38] and Humperdinck -- **Königskinder**.[39] The genre continues today. Probably the best known modern proponents are Samuel Barab and Gian-Carlo Menotti.

Not only did opera composers begin writing for children's audiences, but children began appearing with increasing frequency in "adult operas." In Russia, Tchaikovsky's **Pique Dame** contained a boys' chorus, which was reminiscent of **Carmen**, except that a boy had a speaking role.[40] Puccini wrote a children's Christmas eve chorus in **La Boheme** in which a solo child's singing voice emerged from the chorus.[41] The fulfilment of that

-- the child as solo voice and personality -- occurred right after World War I. Alban Berg's **Wozzeck**, conceived in 1914, is a monument. The child, the illegitimate offspring of Wozzeck and Marie, is playing alone while a group of other children are playing "Ring around the Rosie." One child enters and tells the others that Marie has been murdered. Her offspring does not comprehend but plays on. The world of the child and opera is not all sugarplums.[42]

During the same period, a third development--school opera--emerged. Because only a little of this music has survived, it is hard to ferret out how much school opera was written. Designed to translate Froebel's concerns on music, rhythm, movement, and moral education, school opera has become a significant development. In Russia,[43] Germany,[44] Spain,[45] and the United States,[46] opera was being composed for in-school use. Gretchaninoff composed one of the earliest with **Castle Mouse**. He would contribute a dozen school opera works. In Germany alone, 90 school operas were composed between 1899 and 1914.[47] In the United States, Osbourne McConathy recommended that various songs in his influential **Music Hour** be grouped into dramatic musical plays. He wrote

> The dramatic element of an activity is the most vivid quality in its appeal to children. Little children enter into any imaginative, or 'make-believe,' situation, carrying it on even beyond the point anticipated by the teacher. There should be many opportunities for this sort of expression.[48]

Some practitioners such as Francis W. Parker and H. Caldwell Cook urged that the lyrics be written by the children. Others argued that the music could be borrowed from folk-music collections or composed by the children themselves.[49] After World War I school opera was composed by Paul Hindemith[50] and Carl Orff in Germany.[51] But no single work was more significant than the collaboration of Bertoldt Brecht and Kurt Weill in the

Yes-Man.

The combination of economic dislocation and political extremism in the 1930's took their toll on education and the development of opera, both on the professional stage and in the classroom. For example, after the coming to power of the National Socialists, school opera in Germany slowed greatly.[52]

After World War II, in the fifth period, the twin aspects of school opera and the use of children as major characters in professional opera increased. These developments were not restricted to one country or even one political sphere.[53] In the Soviet Union, for example, the post-war years have seen the incorporation of school opera into much of the curriculum.[54] East German use of the school opera was considered so significant that canons of composition affecting words and music were developed. These included moral training and high aesthetic experiences.[55] In the West, school opera exhibited the same basic goals, although the interpretations would be different. Among the most significant composers was Benjamin Britten whose **Let's Make An Opera**, with its encased **Little Sweep**, is an excellent example of the genre.[56] Britten has also contributed to the professional stage for children. His 1958 **Noye's Fludde** combines simple children's singing parts, professional parts, and audience participation. Yet of greater intellectual significance has been Britten's interpretation of the "world of childhood and...his attitudes to authority." The loss of innocence in childhood and its perversion to evil is the message of **Turn of the Screw**. On the one hand innocence appears cradled in nursery rhymes. Yet nothing is more chilling or suggestive of the growing evil than the "Malo" theme.[57] **Billy Budd** and **Owen Wingrave** continued his great concern.[58]

In the West, a reaction against school opera has been led by the Royal College of Music, which argues that it "fails to bring the child into the world of leading modern composers and is dropped as 'kid stuff' as soon as the youngsters leave school."[59] Regardless, Western composers have continued to write and publish thousands of these operas. Some have incorporated traditional tunes, others modern music, and a few "rock" music. Most have contained more than just a story--most have had a didactic purpose.

In summary, then, since 1800, there has been a growing public concern for the child. In education, welfare, and nutrition throughout the Western world, the child has moved from near obscurity to a place of prime importance.[60] Sir Percy Alden stated, "the child is the foundation of the state and the first line of its defence."[61] Opera has reflected this movement both in its entertainment capacity and in its didactic development. As it was said in honor of Andre Malraux "... politics and art, the life of action in the world of thought, the world of events, and the world of imagination are one." Thus it is with opera -- the life of reality in one world of music -- the world of reality and the world portrayed in the opera are indeed one.

FOOTNOTES

1. Hurd, Michael, Young Person's Guide to Opera. New York, 1965, 9-10. See Drummond, John D., Opera in Perspective. Minneapolis, 1980, and Auden, H.W., "Reflection on Music and Opera, Essence of Opera, N.Y., 356.

2. The same seems to be true for plastic arts. See M. Livingstone, David Hockney. New York, 1981, 10. Audience makeup can be studied in part by examining literature, diaries, reviews, and pictures.

3. Laslett, Peter, The World We have Lost. New York, 1965, 90-91, points to the same problem when the historian argues from a single play, book, or movie.

4. Wilson, Adrien, "The Infancy of the History of Childhood: An Appraisal of Philippe Aries," History and Theory XIX, No. 2, 139-40. Also Laslett, 6-7.

5. Isherwood, R.M., Music in the Service of the King: France in the Seventeenth Century. Ithaca, N.Y., 1973.

6. Laslett, p. vii.

7. Hurd, 10; Wilson, 149-50.

8. Greenleaf, B.K., Children through the Ages: A History of Childhood. New York, 1978, 80. My study is limited to public perception and is not concerned with the important debates that center on Philippe Aries, L'Enfant et la vie familiale sons l'ancien regime (Paris: 1960, 1973, 1975) or Lloyd de Mause's "psychogenic theory of history" as expoused in The History of Childhood. New York, 1974.

9. Greenleaf, 68; Ivy Pinchbeck and Margaret Hewitt, Children in English Society. Toronto, 1969, v. 2, 611; Kett, Rites of Passage. New York, 1977, 228; A. Armengaud, "L'attitude de la Societe a l'Egard de L'Enfant au XIX^{e} Siecle," 303-312, and P. Laslett, "L'attitude a L'Egard de L'Enfant dans L'Angheterre du XIX^{e} Siecle," 313-318, in Annales de Demographie Historique: 1973, Paris, 1973; L. Stone, The Family, Sex, and Marriage in England 1500-1800. London, 1977.

10. On the passing of this phenomenon see Heriot, A., The Castrati in Opera. London, 1956.

11. Schmidgall, Opera as Literature. 174, 350-1; Porter, A., 65; "Lulu" at Last," New Yorker, Marach 12, 1979. Martin, G. Twentieth Century Opera Companion. New York, 1980, 335-336.

12. There is a substantial corpus of literature on this topic that begins around the turn of the century and comes up to the preesent in books, journals, and magazine articles.

13. Strauss, Gerald,, "The State of Pedagogical Theory: c. 1530: What Protestant Reformers Knew About Education," in L. Stone, ed., **Schooling and Society: Studies in the History of Education.** Baltimore, 1976., 74.

14. Gillespie, Margaret C., **History and Trends.** Dubuque, Iowa, 1970, 18-20; Greenleaf, 62.

15. Stone, 432.

16. Gillespie, 21.

17. Greenleaf, 63-4.

18. Stone, 444.

19. Eyken, Willem van der, **Education; the Child, and Society: A Documentary History.** London, 1973, 15.

20. Trattner, Walter I., **Crusade for Children: A History of the National Child Labor Committee and Child Labor Reform in America.** Chicago, 1970, 29; Greenleaf, 122; Pinchbeck; Kaestle, C.F., "Between the Scylla of Brutal Ignorance and the Charybdis of a Literary Education: Elite Attitudes toward Mass Schooling in Early Industrial England and America," in Stone, **Schooling and Society,** 179; Baumer, F. L., **Modern European Thought: Continuity and Change in Ideas, 1600-1950.** New York, 1977, 321-2. Stone, 195-198; Laqueur, T.W., "Working - Class Demand and the Growth of English Elementary Education, 1750-1850," in Stone, **Schooling and Society,** 192-205.

21. John, viii; C.D. Alpin, **The Influence of Froebel's Mother Play and Nursery Songs or Kindergarten Song Books, 1887-1918.** Ph.D: U. of Maryland, 1972; Robertson, 416-419; Brown, 20-1; Harrigan, P.J., "The Social Origins, Ambitions, and Occupations of Secondary Students in France during the Second Empire," in Stone, **Schooling and Society,** 224.

22. Zilversmit, A., "The Failure of Progressive Education, 1920-1940," in Stone, **Schooling and Society,** 254; Greenleaf, 129-130; Kett, 235-6.

23. John, M., **Music Drama in School;** London, 1969, ix.

24. Pinchbeck, 650.

25. Grade, A.E., **The Merrill Guide to Early Juvenile Literature.** Columbus, Ohio, 1970, 37-38; Gillespie, 27-74.

26. Pinchbeck, 492, 494-5, 637; Greenleaf, 124.

27. Troen, S.K., "The Discovery of the Adolescent by American Educational Reformers, 1900-1920: An Economic Perspective," in Stone, **Schooling and Society**, 241; Laslett, 222-3, 236-8; Pinchbeck, 391, 403-4; Greenleaf, 77-78, 104. Trattner, 32-41.

28. Luigi Cherubini; text by Francois Benoit Hoffman; premiere at Theatre Feydeau, Paris, March 13, 1797.

29. Vincenzo Bellini; text by Felice Romani; premiere at la Scala, Milan, December 26, 1831; founded on L. A. Soumet's five act drama, which had opened April 6, 1831. In the play, one of the children, Agenor has a few lines.

30. Giuseppi Verdi; text by Piave; premiere at Rome, November 3, 1844: founded on Byron's play.

31. Albert Lortzing, composer and librettist; premiere at Leipzig, December 31, 1842; founded on a play by A. von Kotzbue.

32. Giacomo Meyerbeer; text by Eugene Scribe; premiere Opera, Paris, April 16, 1849.

33. Georges Bizet; text by H. Meilhac and L. Halevy; premiere Opera Comique, Paris, March 3, 1875; founded on a novel by P. Merimee.

34. Modeste Moussorgsky, composer and librettist; premiere January 27/February 8, 1874; founded on Puskin's play and Karamzin's **History of the Russian State.**

35. United Kingdom: H. M. Gov. Education Act 1902; Education Act 1936; Board of Education 1904.

36. Engelbert Humperdinck; text by Adelheid Humperdinck; premiere Weimar, December 23, 1893.

37. Jules Massenet; text by H. Cain; premiere Brussels, November 3, 1899; founded on Perrault.

38. Hans Pfitzner; text by J. Green; premiere Mayence, April 2, 1895.

39. E. Humperdinck; text by E. Rosmer; premiere Metropolitaan Opera, N.Y., December 28, 1910.

40. P. I. Tchaikovsky; text by Modeste Tchaikovsky, premiere St. Petersburg, December 19, 1890; founded on Puskin.

41. G. Puccini; text by Giacosa and Illica; premiere Turin, February 1, 1896; founded on a novel by H. Murger.

42. Alban Berg; composer and librettist; first conceived 1914; premiere Berlin, December 14, 1925; founded on play by G. Büchner; see K. Monson, **Alban Berg.** Boston, 1979; G. Perle, **The Operas of Alban Berg: Volume One, Wozzeck.** Berkeley, 1980. 112; G.

Martin, Opera Companion to Twentieth Century Opera. New York, 1979, 324.

43. Dimentman, B., "Children and Musicians," ISME Yearbook no. VI, 1979, 56-57.

44. Brock, 186; C. Haas, Gretel in Feenreich (1899) is one of the first.

45. See Manuel de Falla, On Music and Musicians. London, 1979.

46. John, vii.

47. Brock, 11.

48. McConathy, Osbourne. Music Hour in Kindergarten and First Grade. New York, 1929, 196-7.

49. John, vii.

50. Sanders, R. The Days Grow Short. New York, 1980, 160-161.

51. Lang, P. H., The Experience of Opera. New York, 1971, 283.

52. Sanders, R., The Days Grow Short. New York, 1980; 159, 162-3, 165-7.

53. Brock, 11.

54. Dimentman, 56-57.

55. Brock, 11.

56. Evans, P., The Music of Benjamin Britten. Minneaapolis, 1979, 265; Martin, 497; Schotel, B. "Benjamin Britten's Music for Young People," Music Teacher LI, 1972, 10-11.

57. Evans, 218-19; Martin, 518.

58. Evans, 115.

59. Jacobs, A., "Down with School Music," Musical Times, CV, March 1964, 182-3.

60. Bevan, H.K., Child Protection and the Law. Hull, 1970.

61. Pinchbeck, 347.